

Citizen participation in politics: role of the new communication media

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Introduction

In many prevailing systems of government, citizens are allowed to participate only by voting once in several years, politicians are remote from their electors. Incompetence of politicians, corruption and bribery are not seldom and vital decisions are made behind closed doors. In some countries the introduction of citizens' rights to initiate laws, to call referenda and to be consulted on (mainly local and minor) decisions has gone some small way to compensate for these deficits of "representative" democracy.

The ideal that all members of a community or "polis" should be able to participate in reaching common decisions has often been dismissed as impractical (especially where large populations are concerned, but also for other reasons). A "town meeting" for Moscow, even for New York, is difficult to conceive. However, with modern technology it is theoretically possible to allow all citizens to inform themselves about public issues and to vote on them electronically. This was a dream since the early days of telecommunication and has been proposed in detail (compare Bertolt Brecht; Etzioni 1972). For the citizen, modern ICT (information and communication technology), especially computer networks such as the Internet, have vastly increased the speed and volume of communication, and the ease of access to information. Internet and Usenet discussion fora and the World Wide Web contain much political information and analysis. There is much talk "on- and off-line" about the chances of ICT to improve citizen participation in political life, which because of the new electronic media may assume new and surprising forms (PI@net 1996, Macpherson 1997a, Welzel 1998).

For purposes of this article I will concentrate on potential reform of the "rich", western-style democracies.

A remark about assumptions. This author takes the view that, in all contemporary countries and governing systems, improvement in quality of collective decision making, and of policy implementation, is both possible and desirable.

democracy and governance and to politicians.

Several authors will be quoted, firstly a Czech who has lived for many years in western Germany, Jaroslav Langer, former Fellow of the Friedrich-Ebert Foundation, now retired.

In its around 130 year history the modern party state has developed into an oligarchic system of rule, in which the parties have degenerated into para-democratic organisations which only feign representative procedures of decision-making. They are today no more than power-struggle associations designed to gain and maintain the greatest possible share of established political power, which in addition administer a state of permanent sociopolitical crisis. Their leading politicians, together with the lobby of power-holders in industry, finance and other interest groups together with the trade-unions, form a "political class" which usurps the authority and roles of the constitutional bodies, (translator: presumably "parliament" -- Bundestag and "second chamber" -- Bundesrat are meant) taking over their important sociopolitical decisions. (...)

In the opinion of the author of this lecture, many and perhaps a majority of citizens of the established democracies of western Europe would agree with a statement similar to that made (above) by Langer.

He writes further:

We need a new, democratic citizens' constitutional reality, for which there are already a selection of concepts worthy of serious consideration. These potentially realisable proposals, which have been published or presented at conferences, have been ignored or cautiously "silenced to death" by the political class, despite (their) frequent calls for new ideas and "visions". These proposals are in general ignored by the mass-media, which concentrate primarily on current events. They (translator: proposals, concepts for renewal of democracy) must therefore be brought to public attention from below, by citizens, by citizens' movements such as "More Democracy", through appeals of experts, and gradually introduced by this type of pressure. (Langer 1998)

Secondly, Dr. Christian Welzel of the interdisciplinary Science Centre, WZB Berlin. Welzel refers to "dramatic change" of FRG citizens' satisfaction with their democracy since the late 1980s.

"The growing discontent by no means results only from a negative assessment of the economic and social achievements of the system, but arises from a discrepancy between the high value attached to democratic principles and the low level of their perceived fulfilment. In a 1997 survey, 78% reply that a "parliament, which represents the interests of citizens" has "much" to do with democracy but only 30% believe that this principle has been "very effectively" or "effectively" put into

citizens in single political decisions": For 63%, direct participation of citizens is an important component of democracy, but only 24% are of the opinion that this component is strongly or very strongly available. Since the mid-1980s trust in institutions, especially institutions of political representation, has steadily fallen. This begins to strongly undermine the legitimation of the representation principle." He cites Walz whose data shows that, between 1984 and 1994, the proportion of "trusting" respondents fell from 56% to 23%." Welzel cites similar survey results for other countries of western Europe (although the surveys cited are not directly comparable with those from FRG). (Welzel 1998)

From the 1998 report of The Democratic Audit of Sweden, by Olof Petersson, Jörgen Hermansson, Michele Micheletti, Jan Teorell and Anders Westholm

Voters give Swedish democracy a bad grade. Few citizens believe that the relationship between voters and their elected representatives within the European Union works well. Members of the public even consider popular government at the national level and in their own county councils as inadequate. Only municipal democracy receives a passing grade from voters. The SNS Democratic Audit discusses the problems facing democratic systems that are divided into different territorial levels. Because societal problems are becoming more internationalised, the political system is now forced to work across traditional territorial boundaries. The search is on for structures and institutions for internationalised democracy that citizens can view as legitimate. The contemporary debate on democracy is full of apprehensions. The optimism that characterised democracy's victory in Eastern Europe and in several developing countries has dampened. Some observers go so far as to wonder whether democracy will be able to survive its new challenges. (Petersson O. et al 1998)

In this paper it will not be possible to explore the reasons behind the dissatisfaction with democracy, governance and politics expressed by many citizens, some of them writers, scientists and other academics. Numerous reasons are suggested by commentators, such as failure to deal with unemployment, and, in the Federal Republic of Germany, a so-called "Reformstau" (apparent failure to progress with numerous reforms, notably those of taxation and retirement pensions). Different factions of society with their own, special concerns and problems, have their correspondingly varied reasons for discontent. This author is of the view that there are two broads groups of reasons why systems of democracy and governance, including the delegatory/representative and the direct-democratic, should be urgently reviewed and improved

a) to improve collective problem-solving. Problems referred to include the local, regional and global, the economic, ecological and political;

illegitimate concentrations of and sometimes abuses of power, to give all people an opportunity to control more in their own lives, to allow the much bemoaned lack of social responsibility to be reduced by allowing more participation in public affairs, to give especially the young a valid impression that they will not spend their lives as passive bystanders and "election fodder" (c.f. "cannon fodder"). In the latter case, it is proposed here, much could be achieved to reduce the societal alienation and apparent nihilism seen among young people (compare Wagner 1998).

Citizen participation and ICT in the context of debate about democratic systems

A description and evaluation of citizen participation and the new electronic communication media, must in my opinion be placed in the context of debate about democratic systems in general. (Many of the controversies in this debate are old or very old, some have been re-activated because of developments in ICT.) Firstly, the tension between representative and direct democracy. I prefer to use the term "delegatory democracy": delegates or elected groups may represent their electorate well or badly. It has often been asserted that in social groups which are or become larger than a village or small town that it is impractical, inefficient, not feasible or even impossible to design and operate a system in which every enfranchised person has the right to co-decide on issues of public concern, e.g. policy, laws, implementation of decisions. Before the emergence of ICT these arguments against participative democracy seemed more convincing, especially for very large units such as cities or states. Without wishing to consider the controversy about direct versus delegatory democracy at length here, I offer the following. (Note: No doubt there are "hidden agendas" behind some of the different proponents' cases. For instance, politicians in favour of innovations may judge that electronic voting and easier communication with voters would enable them to more readily raise a majority for their own personal campaign. Others, opposed to innovation, may fear for their autonomy of rule or that their failures may be revealed. Lobby organisations or populist politicians or political movements may believe that it would be easier to convince a broad public to support their cause, were it to be formally empowered in a direct form of democracy, than it would be to persuade parliamentarians or government ministers.)

The delegatory model is by far the most prevalent. It appears that elites and publics, in many countries, quite unthinkingly, support a "representative" system as the only possible democratic form. Why is this? Often representative systems of governance arose in direct or indirect continuity with monopolies of power of one sort or another, which had been originally established (maybe centuries ago but in some cases recently) by violence, war and conquest, corruption, trickery, treachery or heredity (e.g. monarchies and aristocracies, juntas of one sort or another, leaderships of revolutionary parties). It may appear natural, having moved a little away from some type of dictatorship or other, and perhaps having struggled for more freedom and justice, to support a "new" system in which leaders may from time to time be rejected and replaced by popular vote. But

have been taken over and accepted. Critically seen, because parliaments are often weak, the party system in modern democracies may be regarded as a form of government in which the people are allowed to choose a ruling regime, effectively consisting of a few dozen, or less, prominent leaders (or, in those countries in which the parliamentary system works well, perhaps a few hundred leaders). Having been elected, this "regime" is often criticised for being mainly responsive to its "entourage" (in modern times the powerful financial, industrial, sometimes religious lobbies) with the voter having almost nothing to say, with no effective contact to government, parliament or political administration in the periods (during which all supposedly collective decisions are made) between infrequent elections. (For historical perspective on modern democratic systems see, regarding Britain, Ascherson 1994 and, regarding the United States of America, Costello 1996.)

My above picture has been painted in a "polarised" way for purposes of illustration. For instance, the partial, mediating, balancing role of organisations to which the interests of sectors of the community are delegated (e.g. trade unions), the specialised lobbies (e.g. to protect environment; for guns) and existing elements of direct democracy (e.g. referenda, mentioned elsewhere) have not been brought in. I leave the reader to judge whether the picture reflects her or his experience and would appreciate receiving comment.

Intra-governmental and parliamentary reform; relations between legislative and executive; informatisation of government and administration and implications for the citizen

Capacity of parliament to control government, and the degree of independence of MPs from party discipline (in some systems imposed by members known as "whips"!) vary from country to country. Matters of intra-governmental and parliamentary reform, and relations between legislative and executive, will not be treated at all fully here. Suffice it to say that ICT may extensively change the ways in which government works (van de Donk 1995), and may alter the relationship between elected representatives and administrations, as illustrated in a Finnish municipality (Asunmaa 1996). Also, the "informatisation" of government and administration has considerable implications for the citizens who are the "consumers" and "owners" of these organisations. There may be some benefits in terms of ease of citizens' access to delegates, officials and to some forms of public information. There will also be increased difficulty for "outsiders" (most citizens) because of increasing complexity of the information and the ICT systems used to store and manage it. The "corridors of power" (from the title of a well known book by C.P. Snow), already locked to the ears and eyes of most citizens, perhaps "Kafkaesque", become increasingly "virtual". Also, this informatisation of government and public administration (not to mention private and corporate information gathering) makes central control and manipulation of citizens and populations potentially much easier. There is the danger of "the glass human-being" (German: *der glaesernde Mensch*) and a system of "Orwell in Athens" (van de

also dangers for freedom and democracy.

Direct democracy and potential effects of ICT

Elements of direct democracy are already practised. Only brief comments can be offered here. The rights of citizens to propose laws in parliaments, also to initiate and take part in referenda on local or national issues, and to be consulted about community planning etc. vary widely from country to country. Suffice to say that should the practice of calling referenda already exist then it would be relatively easy to introduce electronic voting and, in my opinion more importantly, also to enrich the processes of information, discussion and deliberation about the issue in question, during the run-up period to the referendum vote.

Note that high barriers to referenda are often set, or they may be allowed only when called by the ruling group. Consultation of constituents about policy and planning has usually only been possible in small units e.g. villages, towns, small districts, and both referenda and consultation are commonly limited to relatively minor issues (e.g. tax and financial questions may be excluded). Also, referenda and results of consultation may be only advisory, not mandatory on officials or delegates.

It is of interest to note that in Bavaria, Federal Republic of Germany, a movement to introduce the citizens' right to call referenda organised a referendum (already allowed by the Bavarian constitution) on this question at federal state level. A law allowing community (city, town, district) referenda was successfully passed, against the wishes of the ruling political party. Secondly, although there are strong components of direct democracy in Switzerland, the Swiss government recently rejected a proposal to introduce the option to vote electronically in elections and referenda. The proposal was rejected because it was felt that security of voters' identity could not be guaranteed. (Personal communication, H. Burkert, source: NZZ International edition August 21, 1996 p.25) Compare here the extensive proposals for ICT-assisted governance drawn up by the Institute for public and policy, Amsterdam reportedly presented in the recent book by Marcel Bullinga, *The Net, That's Me. Re: The Digital Future*, reviewed at <http://www.wired.com/news/news/politics/story/8760.html>. This proposal, also known as "Decision ?Maker" is extensively described in my paper (Macpherson 1997b).

Many projects which aim to improve democratic systems, including some referred to in this lecture, relate only to representative democracy. There is little to be said against trying to improve existing systems. But ICT appears to offer the chance for citizens to begin to take over more responsibility for collective decisions, so reducing the need for indirect representation and allowing decisions, whether they be delegated or taken directly, to reflect more closely the will of constituents. How exactly the new models of governance will look can only be surmised. Some possibilities may be discerned in the description of, and discussion about, participation projects and models of citizen participation which I plan to mention

Some examples of ICT applications in democracy and politics

Functions of these applications may be classified as follows

- a) Provision by parliaments, governments and public agencies of information for citizens, public and private institutions.
- b) Enhanced interaction between parliamentarians and citizens.
- c) Initiatives which aim to promote public debate and communication on matters of general concern, including ICT applications to citizen participation in governance and direct democracy.

As an example of a) Provision by parliaments, governments and public agencies of information for citizens, public and private institutions, probably the first major project to be established was THOMAS, the US congressional information system. The functions of this service are illustrated by Figure 1.

FIGURE 1.

United States Congressional information system THOMAS

[ThomasJefferson logo]]

In the spirit of Thomas Jefferson,

a service of the U.S. Congress through its Library.

* Full Text of Legislation

Full text of all versions of House and Senate bills searchable by

keyword(s) or by bill number.

o 103rd Congress Bills

o 104th Congress Bills

* Full Text of the Congressional Record

Floors searchable by keyword(s).

- o Congressional Record for the 103rd Congress
- o Congressional Record for the 104th Congress
- o Congressional Record Index for the 103rd Congress (1994)
- o Congressional Record Index for the 104th Congress
- * Bill Summary and Status [New]

Digests and legislative history of bills and amendments, searchable by keyword, index term, bill/amendment number, sponsor/cosponsor, or committee/ subcommittee.

- o Bill Summary and Status for the 104th Congress

* Hot Legislation

Major bills receiving floor action in the 104th Congress as selected by legislative analysts in the Congressional Research Service.

- o Hot bills by topic
- o Hot bills by popular and/or short title
- o Hot bills by number/type
- o Hot bills enacted into law
- o Hot bills under Congressional consideration this week.

* The Constitution of the United States

The full text of the Constitution and its amendments, searchable by

keyword

* How Our Laws Are Made Edward F. Willett, Jr., House Law Revision
Counsel

An explanation of the lawmaking process from the origin of a
legislative proposal through its publication as a law.

* U.S. House of Representatives

House World Wide Web Service, House Gopher, House Constituent E-Mail
Directory, and House of Representatives Audit (Office of the Inspector
General Financial Statements and Performance Reports).

* U.S. Senate

Senate World Wide Web Service, Senate Gopher, and Senate Constituent
E-Mail Addresses.

* C-SPAN (Cable-Satellite Public Affairs Network)

C-SPAN Gopher provides program schedules, Congressional information,
FEC Reports, Supreme Court information and historical government
documents. C-SPAN Web Server offers program and events schedules,
Campaign '96 info, and other political resources.

(.....)

Updates: THOMAS receives text of legislation files several times daily
and the text of the Congressional Record once daily when Congress is in
session; files are processed and made available immediately upon

FIGURE 1 (END)

Examples of b) Enhanced interaction between parliamentarians and citizens appear to be quite widespread, especially in USA. Many candidates for public office both at the State and Federal levels have Internet presentations and e-mail addresses. Private projects and NGOs offer services to voters, aimed to help select candidates in elections. The California Online Voter Guide (CVF) ([URL below](#)), founded circa 1993, is mainly concerned with informing and, as their own description reads, "educating" citizens about matters closely related to the California state and United States federal elections. They write

"In providing this service, CVF sought to increase voter participation in the 1994 election, and in future elections, and to give voters greater confidence in their ability to make informed choices", while at the same time develop a prototype of an online voter guide which could be used in other countries, states, and communities. The Guide was also designed to be used as an educational programme for schools. Relatively simple but important matters such as how to register as a voter and how to vote are explained. Information about election candidates, campaign funding, public issues (controversies) in state and federal elections and also in state-referenda, candidates for official positions such as judges of law, are offered. For example, candidates were asked to provide biography and list their qualifications for office, press releases, endorsements (statements of support by other persons or groups), statements of policy, speeches, and finally detail of how to contact the campaign for more information, or how to volunteer for campaign work! In Europe, a Belgian WWW-based site, Cybercrate ([URL below](#)), provides:

- background information about the system of government, with presentation of issues which have been debated in parliament, quoting the statements of MPs on the issues in question and showing how they voted on bills. Some issues are presented early, so citizens may add their voices to the debate before a vote.

- links to established citizens' groups concerned with social, environmental and political issues

- electronic meeting space where users can bring in new topics, often resulting in lively debate.

Examples of c) Initiatives which aim to promote public debate and communication on matters of general concern, including ICT applications to citizen participation in governance and direct democracy. "Ordinary" citizens can start political initiatives from scratch with the aid of ICT. A small group of California activists opposed a 1995 ballot initiative on immigration reform. Within three days of setting up an e-mail list service, the activists had 600 subscribers. Within a week, the list had grown to over 1,000, and within three weeks, there were 40 rallies being organised on college campuses around the country. It has been claimed that a world-wide information and lobby campaign led to delay of an international treaty, the proposed Multilateral Agreement on Investment MAI. (Internet news: Michael Gurstein <mgurst@ccen.uccb.ns.ca>, Nova Scotia). Using wide-area computer networks such as Internet and Usenet, citizens can set up theme-centred and/or geographically focussed "agora" (Greek: forum of citizens), linked to relevant information on-line and off-line. Such fora may help participants to clarify political views and to weigh the balance of arguments on issues of public concern. Policy proposals may emerge from the debates. An example of a local agora is Minnesota e-democracy (URL below), which combines e-mail with WWW to create a public forum. The rules of debate, resembling "netiquette", have been quite successful in avoiding conflicts and abuses. Substantial discussions on many topics have taken place and recently resulted in an organised political initiative (about public spending on sport), belying the reputation of political e-fora to be mere "talking shops". Electronic town halls have been organised, and candidates for office and elected representatives have visited on-line to debate with citizens. Based in Germany, an initiative for democratic reform which successfully uses ICT is Mehr Demokratie (URL below). This group aims, with some success, to promote direct democracy such as citizens' law-proposals (for debate and voting in parliaments) and citizen-initiated referenda. They run an informative and educative WWW site, list-server discussion groups (one for members, one open to the public) and an on-line journal. A campaign to protect and nourish local democracy, showing benefits of applying new communication technology, is running successfully in Toronto, Canada. Some basic principles are (quote) 1. Local government belongs to and should be responsible to the local citizens who elected it. Bill 103 imposes amalgamation on the cities in Metro Toronto, and must be opposed. 2. Citizens should have democratic control over education in local schools. Bill 104 imposes amalgamation of school boards in Metro Toronto, puts the control of local education until Year 2000 in the hands of

be opposed. (unquote) E-mail has been used for building and co-ordination of citizens' efforts. Electronic fora have aided exchange of information, debate and decision-making. World Wide Web sites are being used to inform and educate about the issues and about how to organise change democratically. The government is taking this campaign very seriously! Long term, much improved participation of citizens in Toronto's political system could result from this experience and example. Potential future developments of citizen participation in politics are discussed elsewhere (Macpherson 1997a and 1997b, sections 4.6, 4.7 and 5.5; Welzel 1998). See also "Further on-line democracy projects", below.

Concluding remarks

What may be predicted about participation of citizens in governance?

Information and communication technologies can contribute as follows:

- helping to alert and inform about public issues and associated law-making, also facilitating debate (e.g. citizens can be in a better position to intervene by approaching their MP before a bill comes to the vote).
- improving knowledge about candidates for parliaments and other public jobs, e.g. revealing their qualifications for office and political knowledge, their previous performance on election promises, campaign finance, which interest group they support (e.g. business, religion, "worthy causes" such as natural environment or political party).
- allowing the voter to vote in a more informed and critical way.
- enabling the citizen between elections to join in a public debate more easily, to intervene by writing to newspapers etc., even to start campaigns aimed at influencing public opinion and parliamentary decisions and to monitor election promises.
- allowing members of political parties to judge better the performance of their own delegates and candidates for public office
- encouraging and helping to empower citizens to be pro-active. Forms of expression may be: lobbying MPs, public officials and commercial enterprises; informing and educating others, publishing with WWW; moral appeals; protest and social movements; "non-governmental" organising;

democracy itself.

The ease of communication and access to information now and in the near future has led some observers to predict that a new public arena or "agora" will emerge to aid collective decision-making. Some developments during the coming few decades may be:

- closer guidance of MPs and governments by public will, especially in the legislative periods between elections - compare "A political party guided by constituents?" (Macpherson 1997b - see sections 3.4 and 3.5).
- direct decision-making by citizens on at least some issues. Gradual transformation of representative "delegatory" democracy into a process with more deliberation and more involvement of citizens.
- electronic voting (a) to select candidates in elections (b) on laws and public issues, with direct decision-making by constituents on some issues.

Of course, deep changes in established systems of governance should not occur too rapidly and are unlikely to do so. However, many citizens do wish to participate more in matters which greatly affect their lives and the future. Information technology can help, although many other factors are important too.

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URLs (Internet universal resource locations):

California Online Voter Guide <http://www.calvoter.org/>

Cybercrate, Belgium <http://www.axismundi.org/cybercrate>

Mehr Demokratie, Federal Republic of Germany

<http://www.mehr-demokratie.de>

Minnesota e-democracy <http://freenet.msp.mn.us/govt/e-democracy>

Further on-line democracy projects

Britain <http://www.democracy.org.uk/>

France <http://www.globenet.org/vecam>

Japan <http://lp.jiyu.net/english.htm>

Netherlands <http://www.xs4all.nl/~roesderz/english/>

Sweden <http://www.ltdalarna.se>

Switzerland <http://www.politics.ch>

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INTEGRAL STUDIES: citizen, society, polity
<http://www.snafu.de/~mjm/init.html>

Democr@cy Forum <http://www.democracyforum.net>

Korea <http://forum.nca.or.kr/edem/index.htm>

Peru <http://www.protelsa.com.pe/kybernesis/>

GOVNEWS <http://www.govnews.org/govnews/govnews.html>

TAN+N Teledemocracy Action News and Network
<http://www.auburn.edu/tann>

Abstract and Summary

Participation of all members in the polis, and true democracy, are ideals whose realisation seems more approachable now that high average levels of education coincide with astounding advances in electronically based systems of human communication. Also, deficits in western-style democracy and governance have lead citizens and scholars to plead for, firstly, improvements in representative systems of government and secondly for the more widespread introduction of direct democratic components into governance. Brief evidence of changing public attitudes to democracy and governance is provided. It is noted that improvements in democratic systems are essential in order to allow collective coping with urgent problems in both local and global ecology and economy, and in order that people, especially the young, can begin to anticipate and fulfil a more meaningful and responsible role in their societies. By reference to recent applications of new information and communication media in politics and to innovations in citizen participation, some ways to improve these deficits of democracy and governance are illustrated.

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Further on-line democracy projects, below.

Concluding remarks

References

URLs (Internet universal resource locations) WWW addresses of Internet and Politics projects

Further on-line democracy projects

Abstract/Summary

END

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